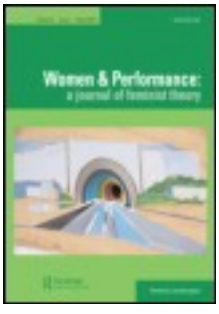

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Of Ambiguity and Ambivalence Venus in Fur: Lyceum Theater, NYC, directed by Walter Bobbie

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The title of David Ives's play, *Venus in Fur*, refers to Leopold Von Sacer-Macoch's nineteenth-century novella, *Venus in Furs*.[1] Whereas Masoch's work helped late-nineteenth-century psychiatry name a sexual perversion, Ives uses material from the novella to explore the power dynamics that so often animate our sexual relations. More than simply giving us an amped-up version of those dynamics though, *Venus in Fur* also offers an astute illustration of how our sexual identities can be complicated by our ambivalence towards bourgeois culture: on the one side, our libidos like to amplify themselves with their disdain for cultural norms; on the other, our cultural commitments often push us to behave in ways that undermine libidinal expression. Ives engages with these issues in a remarkably minimalist setting. His play consists of little more than a bare stage and two characters: Thomas (played by Hugh Dancy) is a writer/director who has adapted Masoch's novella for the theater; at the beginning of the play, he's just finished a frustrating day of auditions when Vanda (played by Nina Arianda) sweeps in, late for her appointment, after everyone but Thomas has left.

Before she arrives though, Thomas, on the phone, complains to his fiancée about the dearth of "sexy-slash-articulate women with some classical training and a particle of brain in their skulls" (3). Vanda enters after thunder and lightning have flickered the stage lights and ended Thomas's phone call. A minimalist setting infused with melodrama: we soon learn that Vanda has come to audition for the part of Wanda, a homophonic coincidence that may sound a bit rich. Nevertheless, the rapid pace of Ives's script distracts us from such a concern. Arianda's accentuation of this pacing also keeps us interested in Vanda, who is over the top: she curses volubly about the fact that she's late, Thomas can't find her appointment anyway, she takes off her coat to reveal leather lingerie and a collar, and then strips down further while pulling out a period dress that she's brought with her. All of this before Thomas has consented to audition her.

Vanda pushes every opening (for example, when Thomas's fiancé calls him back, she takes his distraction as permission to put on the dress). While her intensity repels

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Thomas, it also compels him (and us). She fully occupies our attention: we're in such awe of her energy that it's easy to identify with Thomas's desire to push her away. Nevertheless, after Thomas ends his second phone call, he gets caught up in her commitment to going forward with the audition. After he's complied with Vanda's request to zip up her dress, they prepare to read the first scene. Somehow, to Thomas's confusion, she's already in possession of the entire script rather than just the sides. But while Vanda has and knows things she shouldn't, there are also many things that she doesn't know that she should. In trying to flatter Thomas, she attributes someone else's play to him; as Thomas gives her blocking instructions, she has trouble understanding that by "left" he means stage left; finally, her knowledge of Greek tragedy and the Bible are shaky at best. We get the sense that her cultural capital is not fully in order. It's easy to wonder about this gorgeous woman, as Thomas surely does: *is this someone who's leaned too much on her beauty? Someone who didn't bother learning enough of the vocabulary and cultural conventions that theater demands?* Of course, this line of thinking is exactly the bait that Ives wants Thomas, and us, to take. For while thoughts like those may make us proud of ourselves for having got our critical faculties up, our thinking them also means that we've come to see Vanda as a believable character: we've suspended any disbelief that the excesses of her persona might have inspired in us.

It's easy for us to conclude that Vanda is as unsophisticated as she presents herself to be. With that judgment, we flatter ourselves in a way that also distracts us from thinking too hard about how or why she seems to know so much about Thomas's play. (Not to mention the related question: *how could she possibly know so much about his play when she seems so clueless about so much else?*) In any case, before we are done being distracted by her lack of cultural capital, she pulls our attention in the opposite direction. From the moment the characters begin acting their roles, we're blown away by Vanda's inhuman ability to embody Wanda: perfect Austrian accent, perfect poise. As the two characters move further into the scenes, the power dynamics begin to reverse, not merely because Vanda's acting ability takes Thomas by surprise, but also as a result of her capacity to exploit the social and sexual issues that the script gives her license to enact. Multiple times, she seamlessly shifts from embodying the Dom to pestering Thomas (in perfect, valley-girl English) about whether or not he's using the play to vent repressed issues in his own life.

Nevertheless, even as Vanda starts to gain power over Thomas, we're still not quite sure what to think of her. On one hand she's radically undisciplined, moving into and out of character willy-nilly; on the other hand, her ability to shift character so quickly and precisely – with so little space between ditzy Vanda and imperious Wanda – is virtuosic. It takes discipline to embody such indiscipline, and the audience may wonder whether the control belongs to the character or just the actor. While Vanda exhibits superhuman bodily control, everything else that we know of her suggests that she shouldn't be capable of such poise. Caught between these contradictory messages, we start to suspect the quality of our own judgment. In this state, it's easy to suspend questions about the play's complexity in favor of basking in the pleasures of its surface-level ironies and ambiguities.

One of the play's main ambiguities emerges as Thomas becomes increasingly similar to the masochistic Doctor whose part he reads in the audition (Kushemski). To hilarious effect, Thomas's increasing fascination with Vanda parallels Kushemski's subordination to

Wanda. For instance, late in the play, Vanda (as Wanda) – holding a knife to Thomas's throat – speaks of how "delicious" it is: "Not just to have some random man in my control, some fool. But a man who's smitten with me, no less" (61). For the audience, that line's deliciousness stems from its ambiguity – Vanda's delivery letting us know that she's describing Thomas's smittenness as much as Kushemski's. Even better is the fact that she's gained power over Thomas via her masterful enactment of the words he's written. Textual ambiguities often allow ironies to emerge: one moment Thomas is in charge of the play he's adapted; the next moment, Vanda has flipped the text over on him, trapping him within the power dynamics of his own play. Wanda has compelled Thomas to commit to a role inside his own play, a commitment that, rather than remaining safely within the play's fantasy space, threatens his sense of self in his everyday life. This is an odd kind of theatricality.

Gilles Deleuze, in his short book on Masoch, suggests that such theatricality is fundamental to masochism. In *Coldness and Cruelty*, Deleuze argues that the masochist "does not believe in negating or destroying the world nor in idealizing it: what he does is to disavow and thus to suspend it, in order to secure an ideal which is itself suspended in fantasy" (32–3). In Masoch's novella, Kushemski seeks to suspend his social role, to give up his power to Wanda, to secure his ideal by subordinating himself to her. By contrast, Thomas gets caught in a fantasy that spills over into reality, the audition's enactment of Vanda's domination leading him, ultimately, to doubt his identity, and his authority. We should thus see the theatrical as not just something that can suspend disbelief, but also something that can suspend belief (in our habits, in our normative commitments). In formalized masochistic relationships, the social order's suspension is most often achieved via a contract (which renders the fantasy-support as a stable, concrete social thing). In Masoch's novella (and in Thomas's play), Wanda initially has a halfhearted response to Kushemski's desire to become her slave; nevertheless, she soon commits wholeheartedly to the idea, offering him a contract that renders him her servant.

But even though Wanda seems to be, or is temporarily the one in charge, by the end of the novella, the power dynamics reverse, leaving Kushemski running the show. Thomas replicates this order in his play, which leads Vanda to have problems with his adaptation. On those occasions when she argues things like, "this part is so sexist, it makes me, like, scream," he hides behind the novella, arguing that those parts are "from the book" (52). Towards the end of the play, this issue so unsettles Vanda that she makes Thomas take on Wanda's role since, she claims, he understands the character in a way that she can't. Taking on Kushemski's part, Vanda binds Wanda/Thomas to one of the studio's columns (as called on to do by the stage directions). Now holding a Knife to "Wanda's" throat, Vanda gives Thomas an experience of terror and powerlessness. By the play's end, we're certain that Thomas is bound to change his play in some way that will enact the reversal that he's fully in the throes of there on stage, thunder and lightning booming all around.

All of that's well and good: not only does that reversal get Ives out from under the sexism of Masoch's nineteenth-century social conventions, but it also makes for an eminently enjoyable evening of theater. However, there's another, knottier and more significant problem that the play raises but whose implications it fails to fully address, namely cultural ambivalence. We can understand what I'm after here by looking at a repeated exchange between Vanda and Thomas. On three occasions, Vanda says *ambivalent* when she

means *ambiguous*. Thomas, of course, unfailingly corrects her. It's true that the obvious reason for Vanda's persistence in the error is her need to play dumb in order to convince Thomas that she's not an intellectual threat. It's also true that ambiguous is an excellent description of the situations in which Masoch's characters find themselves: e.g., the matter of Wanda's wanting or not wanting to be Kushemski's torturer, the matter of Kushemski wanting or not wanting to lose or retain control, and the matter of who, if either of them, is actually in control in their relationship's more complicated moments. In these areas, both the novella and the play feel like halls of mirrors, the ambiguities often pushing us to reconsider those moments when we think we have the most solid sense of who these characters are. These moments may be the most deceptive ones, with the characters playing roles on top of roles.

Nevertheless, even if we take these ambiguities as given, what if ambivalence offers an equally accurate description of those situations, just from a different perspective? On this view, Wanda both yearns to play the torturer *and* is pained by her embodiment of that role; similarly, Kushemski desperately wants to lose all control even as he can't stand that thought. If these descriptions are accurate, what then of Thomas and Vanda?

Thomas is *Venus's* other ambivalent soul. Where about half of Ives's play is devoted to enacting Masoch's novella, the other half concerns Thomas's cultural discontents, his longing for a more charged life, for "Outsized emotions. Operatic emotions" (48). Speaking of his characters, he laments that: "Nobody's in total thrall like this anymore. Nobody's overcome by passion like this or goes through this kind of rage" (48). To his belief that we should go to the theater for this kind of passion, Vanda responds that she "thought we're supposed to go to *life* for passions we're not getting in life" (48). She then goes on to speculate about Thomas's life: its bourgeois comforts, its *New York Review of Books*-reading intellectual pleasures, its woman-breadwinner/guy-artist sexual conventions. To this characterization's devastating accuracy, Thomas wonders: "Are we that transparent" (50)? In that question, he's not asking about his own life so much as the embedded lives of all of those who belong to middlebrow bourgeois culture. Vanda responds that the answer to his question is in one of the few lines the he added to Masoch's words: "We're all explicable. What we're not is extricable" (50).

As implied above though, Vanda arrived at that audition to help Thomas extricate himself from some of his habitual ways of thinking. She disrupts his assumptions about life, both by surfacing his unconscious sexism, and by challenging the energy with which he submits to cultural conventions. In this sense, she reads his play as a symptom – a clumsy acting out – of energy that he has repressed in his everyday life. In this critique of him (and of most of that play's likely audience), we could say that she's calling on him and on us to find ways to extricate ourselves from our civilizational discontents (Freud 1962): to find ways to have our libidinal cake and eat it too. Given who she is (we might call her the *dea in machina*), it's awfully easy for her to throw down such an injunction, as if sexism and unrestrained emotions were not things that most of us average schleps have the hardest time keeping apart; as if a world populated with unsexist yet vibrantly sexual human creatures weren't some kind of utopic dream. But most attempts to achieve this dream come up hard against some of our culture's most problematic and enduring double binds. It's to Ives's credit that his play points towards the cultural problem, but one also wonders what he might be capable of were it to risk going beyond

the relatively safe reversal that ends his play: to think hard about the more intractable problems raised by any encounter with, or attempt to embody, transcendent spirit. We should, I believe, always be striving towards such spirit, though always alive to the ambiguities and ambivalences that our attempts to embody it will unavoidably engender.

Note on contributor

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Note

1. Other than the need to distinguish between Masoch's novella and Ives's play, I've only come up with a marginally satisfying explanation for Ives's shift from *Furs* to *Fur*. It is true that there's only one fur in Ives's play.

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